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## LETTERS FROM AUSTRIA.

## I.

## EDUCATION.

IT is my intention in the following communications to present in clear outline a picture of the general condition of the Jews in Austria. The progress of the Jewish people, generally, despite many transformations due to the general evolution of history, has ever and everywhere been the same. The outward expression varies ; not so the indwelling idea. It is most unjust therefore to regard Judaism at the present day as in its decay because its forms are, in some points, different from what they were in the past. The dynamic force inherent in our religion has been the very condition of its continuance. Diversity of opinion as to its external ceremonial forms and ritual institutions has contributed to its vitality and vigour. "Some bind. Others loosen. Yet are their words all manifestations of the living God's spirit"—was already a Talmudic aphorism. I can, therefore, by no means side with those who continually bewail the religious degeneracy of the age. We can quite understand these Jeremiads coming from the mouths of those who have kept the traditional practice of Judaism inviolably intact. But men whose lives present no edifying example of consistent conservatism have certainly but little right to make such complaints. They remind us, to quote the familiar Rabbinic illustration, of "one who bathes himself, yet grasps within his hand the cause of defilement."

Without allowing myself, therefore, to be disturbed by the clamours of prejudice about the perilous state of Judaism, I shall endeavour to describe its concrete relations, as they present themselves in Austria. And to do this systematically, I shall discuss them under three heads—(1) Education (*Torah*) ; (2) Worship (*Abodah*) ; (3) Philanthropy (*G'milut Chassadim*).

Some readers may perhaps deem the limits here marked out too narrow. For the present, however, I cannot extend my plan. Any effort, to be successful, requires mental concentration ; the indispensable condition of which, again, is often restriction and limitation of subject. The area of discussion selected is moreover wide enough to include topics that will satisfy larger demands. The opportunity will offer itself, within the prescribed bounds, of referring to the political, social and scientific relations of the Austrian Jews.

The ground which we are now about to tread is holy. Where there is instruction, God's spirit breathes. All paths of learning lead to a better knowledge of him. According to Judaism,

therefore, Education is the *suprema lex*. "The study of the Law outweighs all else" was considered so important a maxim that it was taken up from the Mishna into the Liturgy. At the threshold, however, I am confronted with a perplexing question: Of what class of Jewish education in Austria shall I speak, of that given in the Cheder, of that given in the communal schools, or of that given in the public schools, the greater number of which are State establishments? It will best accord with my aim, I believe, if I review all three types.

The Cheder has repeatedly formed the subject of earnest discussion. Even the Government organs have thoroughly gone into the question. Not merely the substance of instruction but also the method and *locale* have been officially examined and reported upon. National, pedagogic and sanitary considerations have been adduced to demonstrate the indefensible character of this class of schools. Curiously enough, these reports have not met with the ready and general acceptance they deserve. Totally ignoring the fact that the Talmud itself speaks of profane elements in Jewish schools (which clearly proves that secular subjects formed part of a Jewish curriculum), and itself demands the abandonment of "jargon" in favour of Hebrew, Greek or Syriac, a party in Galicia and Hungary vehemently contend that the Cheder must be retained at all costs. This rigidity is, for many reasons, to be deplored. First, the internal harmony of the community has thereby been prejudicially affected. Then, the Jewish name has been degraded through it. And lastly it can be proved that many of those who have undergone the discipline of the Cheder, have, as soon as they tasted of the honey of modern culture and their eyes were opened, learnt to look with hostility not only upon Jewish research, but even upon Judaism itself.

Nevertheless, I am decidedly against the adoption of coercive measures in this direction. Experience in Galicia and Hungary has taught us that every act of aggressiveness provokes a counter-movement. This ought to occasion us no surprise. No one yields his prerogative without a struggle. Judaism, in the last generation, was, on the whole, orthodox. The party that claims this title at the present day consequently believes its authority in Judaism to be incontestable. Taking these circumstances into consideration, the more enlightened among our community have no other course open to them than to proceed steadily on their own lines. The wheel of time moves incessantly, remorselessly crushing all who rashly attempt to impede its progress. So previously, amidst the conflict of opinions on the subject of Jewish instruction, a mediating expedient was hit upon to attain the desired end. Schools were established, calculated to satisfy the just demands of the orthodox for Hebrew knowledge as well as the claims of the age and of society for modern culture. These were termed communal schools.

Called into existence in Bohemia and Moravia, more than

fifty years ago, they did wonders both for Judaism and enlightenment. Men like Leopold Löw, Joseph Weisse, Peter Beer, Wolf Mayer, distinguished for knowledge and filled with a burning enthusiasm for our faith, devoted themselves to the work of instruction at these institutions. The results they achieved excited emulation among other Jewish congregations to found schools on a similar plan and of a similar character. The conviction gradually gained ground even in orthodox circles that Thora and Science could be combined without injury to the cause of true Judaism.

Since that period, however, the communal school has considerably deteriorated. Its programme of instruction has been altered and the teaching staff is not always equal to its task.

The communal school in the last generation, according to the express intention of the managers, provided some of its pupils with a preparatory and others with a complete education. Among the scholars there were those who, besides their proficiency in secular subjects, had become familiar with the Bible in the original, could use the Commentaries for the solution of difficulties, had mastered the rules of Grammar, possessed a certain facility in Hebrew composition, had learnt, as the phrase then went, so many pages of Mishna and Gemara, and, in certain parts of the Talmud, could dispense with a teacher. Of such pupils a reasonable hope might be entertained that the close of their school life would not bring their Hebrew studies to a close; and, in fact, many of them successfully continued their Jewish studies, and in time, filled the Rabbinical office. For these, then, the communal school was preparatory. The less gifted pupils received an intellectual and moral equipment sufficient to fit them for a Jewish life; and for them the communal schools were all in all.

How different is the condition of these schools now! We can hardly credit our eyes when we examine their present programme. The translation of some chapters, or, where the curriculum is an ambitious one, of some sections of the Scriptures, with a few meagre passages from Rashi; a few Grammatical rules and, in exceptional cases, a few pages of Talmud, this "little of everything and nothing thoroughly" has produced a class of Jews who plume themselves on their knowledge of Judaism and are not at all backward or modest in asserting themselves if, by ill-luck, they obtain a seat and a voice in communal councils.

It cannot be denied that external causes have partly contributed to this state of affairs. More especially, the materialistic spirit of the age has forced the conclusion on the minds of many parents that it is a sheer waste of time to keep their children at studies which cannot help them in practical life. Many of the teachers at these institutions, however, must take some share of the blame for the wretched condition of the schools.

In the first place, it cannot be sufficiently deplored that the

acquaintance with Hebrew scholarship which the teachers possess is too often meagre and inadequate for their vocation. We need Diogenes' lantern to find teachers like Eisler in Nicholsburg, Deutsch in Buda-Pesth, Hezl in Brody. Our demands, however, are not so exacting. What we have a right to expect from a practical teacher is familiarity with Holy Writ, and a knowledge of its principal commentaries, Rashi, Nachmanides, Ibn Ezra, etc.; further, some acquaintance with modern Biblical research; the ability to write Hebrew idiomatically; a thorough grasp of the rules of Hebrew grammar; and, lastly, that the Talmud shall not be altogether a *terra incognita* to him. The steps that ought to be taken in order to satisfy these requirements are easy to suggest. First and foremost, a training college for the education of Jewish teachers must be established. Everyone was therefore delighted when it was reported that Baron Hirsch's magnificent programme for the culture of the Jews in Galicia included the establishment of such an institution.

The imperative need of a Teachers' Training College in Galicia has, indeed, long been recognised. The deeply lamented Dr. Zucker, late member of the Diet and President of the Lemberg Jewish community, was fully alive to its necessity, and made every effort several years ago to obtain funds for its establishment and maintenance. His exertions were not altogether fruitless. The Galician Diet, the "Alliance Israelite" in Vienna and other bodies promised subventions. The sudden death of this zealous worker brought matters to a standstill. His colleagues in the Diet took up the subject out of respect for the memory of the deceased. But no practical results have hitherto ensued. This dilatoriness is clearly traceable to the circumstance that people look to Baron Hirsch's munificence for the realisation of the scheme.

A recent enactment has made the situation more critical. Our various legislatures decided last session that the expenses for religious instruction in the Public Schools shall be defrayed, not, as hitherto, by the executives of the various denominational bodies, but by the general supporters of the schools, viz.: the province or commune. The Galician School Board, I hear on good authority, refuses to salary any teacher of religion who cannot produce a recognised certificate of his capacity for teaching. Does not this look like a plain challenge to us to set about establishing a Training College without delay?

From another quarter, too, the cry for such a seminary is heard. Brünn possesses a school, the object of which is to prepare the pupils of the intermediate school sufficiently to qualify them for admission into a Rabbinical and Teachers' College. I am informed that it is contemplated in the immediate future to establish such a college in Vienna. On this I shall have something to say later on. A college of this kind will serve three important objects. Those

who devote themselves to Jewish education will enjoy there facilities for acquiring the scholarship requisite for their vocation. They will further learn the right method of imparting instruction. And, finally, they will be trained to live religiously. To prove to your readers that Biblical criticism is not contrary to the spirit of Judaism would be carrying coals to Newcastle. So soon as Holy Writ became a subject for diverging expositions and deductions, and variations in the scriptural text were recognised, the door was opened to Biblical criticism ; and, if a single letter of the Law could have a multitude of legal deductions appended to it, this was only possible because the text was no longer interpreted in its literal simplicity. In two points, however, the principle of *Noli me tangere* was maintained. The truth of the Biblical account was not questioned ; its authenticity was not doubted. The miracles recorded in Scripture may, Joseph Albo tells us, be explained naturally ; but we must not deny their having occurred. The same with Biblical criticism. It may be ever so free and bold so long as the truth and credibility of the Bible is not impugned.

But to-day many a Jewish teacher, eager like every sciolist to make his light shine, does not scruple to regale his young pupils with his freshly-acquired, ill-digested information on Biblical criticism. Need we dwell on the mischief that has resulted ? To instil doubt into the youthful mind is to poison it. "Keep your children from speculation," was the Talmudic recommendation to parents.

This class of teachers not only take no trouble to disguise their scepticism in oral instruction, but, even in their daily lives, set an example of anything but religiousness. In their spurious culture they do not recognise any obligation to observe the customs and institutions of Judaism. The inconsistency between their teaching and practice gives them no concern ; and they are too frivolous to mind the shocks which their conduct gives to the feelings of others.

What wonder then is it that the *Machziké-ha-Dath* in Galicia declares that for secular subjects—if these are at all to be taught, Gentile rather than Jewish teachers should be engaged ; the latter having proved a veritable cancer to Jewish youth. In Hungary, the late Trefort, Minister of Education, succeeded in greatly improving the education of the Jewish children under his jurisdiction, in spite of the remonstrances which the orthodox party carried to the foot of the throne itself. The complaints against the teachers, however, are there as vehement as here.

The training of Jewish teachers of religion must therefore be accepted as a *conditio sine qua non* if Jewish instruction is to bear good fruit.

Jewish education has undergone a radical modification if not a complete revolution since Austria became a constitutional state, and the doors of the public schools were opened, by the educational legislation of May 1868, to children of all denomina-

nations. A considerable number of parents strongly cherished the belief that only good could ensue from their children sitting on the same benches and studying under the same roof with Christian scholars. They, therefore, determined to avail themselves to the full of the privileges the law offered to them. Nor can their conviction be condemned as an error. While admitting that all the hoped-for results have not been realised, yet this is certain, that many undesirable peculiarities which have parasitically clung to the Jews, have been, to a certain degree, rubbed off by contact with their Gentile school-fellows. The latter, again, have been afforded the opportunity of learning to appreciate the undeniable talents and capacities of the Jewish youth. For, in every public educational institute, the Jewish students furnish, as indeed is generally conceded, a larger or smaller but always notable contingent to the *élite* of the school or college. That the intercourse between young Jews and Gentiles is not yet as free and cordial as might be wished ought to occasion no surprise. Such a fusion needs a long time for its accomplishment. Before a chemical combination can take place, a high temperature must be developed ; and substances to be fused together, must first be decomposed. And so days of dire tribulation will, we are told, precede the Messianic age, when the brotherhood of mankind shall be consummated. We cannot then feel regret that our youth abandon the institutions specially built for them and flock to the public schools. The problem that now presents itself is this : How are we to provide for the religious education of the young in these schools ? The code expressly requires the religion shall form an integral portion of the general education. How shall we satisfy that requirement ?

The State, in the exercise of its supreme authority and with the laudable object of training a race equally vigorous in body and mind, has, to prevent over-pressure, fixed the time to be devoted to religious instruction. For the two lower classes in the national schools, one hour a week, and for the higher classes of these schools, as well as for the Middle-class and Intermediate schools, two hours have been appointed. I must here remark that, previous to the Revision of the Educational Code in May 1883, the upper forms of the national schools also received only one hour's religious instruction a week.

What was to be done with this limited opportunity ?

It would obviously not answer to take up the whole hour with purely religious instruction ; the children must learn at least enough Hebrew to be able to join in public worship. On the other hand, Hebrew teaching could not be allowed to predominate, as, strictly speaking, it cannot be termed *religious* instruction at all. Many parents, too, raised strong objections to a preponderance of Hebrew in their children's curriculum, for fear that it might lead to over-pressure.

For the discovery of the clue through this maze, the executive

of the Viennese community may fairly claim credit. Keeping the object to be attained steadily in view, and with the assistance of eminent practical teachers they drew up a scheme of instruction which, under the circumstances, ought to give satisfaction. To unfold the whole of their plan in detail would take up too much space. It will suffice to give its leading outlines.

We must premise that compulsory school attendance begins in Austria at the end of the sixth year and continues till the end of the fourteenth year. These eight years are spent either in the National (*Volksschulen*) or Middle-class (*Bürgerschulen*) or, in the case of boys, eventually in the lower classes of the Higher-grade (*Mittelschulen*) schools. For them, the scheme is so arranged that, during the whole of their school life, a portion of the hour devoted to religious instruction is taken up with the reading of passages from the Hebrew prayer-book ; the explanation of what is read ; the translation of selected prayers, the repetition of congregational responses. The remainder of the hour is devoted to Bible History, Ethics and Religion. Where feasible, Hebrew texts bearing on these subjects are taught. Biblical Science, Post Biblical history and Bible readings are also included in the scheme.

Although we do not pretend that this is an ideal Jewish education, still it must be admitted that, with the requisite zeal and earnestness on the part of the teacher, a corresponding assiduity on the pupils' side and the loyal encouragement of the parents, enough can be done in eight years to make children, when they have left school, feel that they are Jews.

In sketching the plan of instruction for Jewish scholars attending the upper classes of the Intermediate or Higher-Grade schools (*Mittelschulen*) a higher standard was adopted. The heavier demands made by the ordinary schoolwork on the advanced pupils render it impossible to impose upon them an additional study of Hebrew. The teacher's efforts are therefore directed to awakening in them a sense of religion, inspiring them with an attachment to their faith, love for their co-religionists and veneration for their past. The lesson on religion aims at informing their minds with the ethical contents and prescriptions of Judaism. The Bible lesson furnishes an opportunity for creating in them an appreciation of the unsurpassed legislation, irresistible eloquence, æsthetic design, beauty of style, poetic richness of colour and elevation of tone which characterise the Book of Books. In teaching Jewish history, the teacher endeavours to imbue his pupils with a just sense of and sympathy for the achievements, significance and mission of their people in the economy of nations. The history of Jewish Literature brings the conviction home to the students' minds that the intellectual heroes of their race also produced immortal works ; specimens of these are with this view read to the class.

It seems to me that, taking things as they are, a more efficient

plan and one more suited to its purpose could hardly have been formulated. And, in fact, this scheme has, *mutatis mutandis*, been widely adopted.

In the consciousness that this religious instruction, to be fruitful, needs supplementing, the executive of the Vienna Community have started a movement, the excellence of which has secured it favour at home and abroad. I refer to the initiation of religious services for the young. The beneficial effects of this institution are manifest in various directions.

The children attending national, middle-class and higher-grade schools all gladly participate in these services. Attendance, it must be added, is not obligatory but optional. What also deserves to be mentioned is that the children's example acts as a powerful inducement to the parents to visit the House of God more frequently.

The services are organised as follows. Every Saturday morning, services are held in all the synagogues of the ten quarters of Vienna for the benefit of the children attending the national and middle-class schools. In the afternoon, the scholars of the higher-grade schools worship in the two communal synagogues. The ordinary Sabbath Musaf and Mincha are recited; with this difference, however, that in the morning, as in the afternoon, only three are called up to the Law. These are selected from among the young worshippers. German hymns are also sung. The elevating and inspiring effects which hundreds of young voices uplifted in devotional praises exercises upon the listener's mind can be better felt than described.

A leading feature of these services is the Religious Address. This is given by one of the teachers. If these services for the young are to supply the deficiencies of school instruction, that object will be best and most directly achieved by the Address. As a rule, it is based on the weekly portion and consists of an exposition of the Sedra and the deduction of its lessons.

The success of this institution, so far, justifies the belief that in it lies the guarantee for the continuance and vitality of Judaism in the next generation.

The heads of the Vienna Jewish community do not consider that with this their task is finished. They have established a school for Hebrew and particularly Biblical studies. Here facilities are afforded for acquiring a larger amount of Hebrew knowledge. There are also a few exhibitions for the study of the Talmud.

Judaism has been pronounced to be doomed; yet it enjoys a long reprieve. Thank God, things are not as bad as some would make out. The parents, however, we much regret to say, are not as alive to their duty as they ought to be. Religious instruction, as I have described it, may satisfy the Mosaic requirement. But the precept to instruct the young was addressed, not to the heads of a community, but to fathers.

In many intermediate schools, in Bohemia and Moravia,

particularly where the local Rabbi acts as teacher of religion, a portion of the Hebrew Bible or an extract from the Hebrew writings of the Hispano-Moravian period is chosen as the subject of instruction. All respect to the motive that prompts this selection. But a close examination shows that it fails to attain its object. The pupils who have been taught on this plan, carry away little solid information and know practically nothing of the essence of Judaism, its significance and historic mission. Would that these zealous advocates for the teaching of a few chapters of the Hebrew Bible could draw the moral, that so plainly lies on the surface, from the fact that Saadiah, Bechaja, Maimonides, etc., wrote their immortal works for the instruction of their contemporaries in Arabic, then the vernacular; and that Ezra already thought it necessary to have the Scriptures rendered into the vulgar tongue, Aramaic. It cannot be so very much amiss then, if, under prevailing circumstances, Jewish children receive religious instruction in the language they understand. Here, I come to a topic, already partly discussed, but the importance of which cannot be over-estimated. I refer to the question of teachers.

The Jewish teacher of religion in the Intermediate or High school ought to stand on a level, in general culture, with the rest of the teaching staff. His colleagues should find in him an able exponent and a worthy representative of the religion and science of Judaism. His character and enthusiasm ought to animate and inspire his scholars. Where, however, shall we get teachers with these qualifications?

The Vienna community, with its 14,000 Jewish boys and girls, is fortunate enough to possess, in the teachers of religion who work at the High schools, the right men in the right place. The same cannot be said of the other Austrian congregations.

Hence, as already remarked, the inevitable necessity of a training school for teachers. Another subject also pressingly calls for settlement—good school books on religion.

The oft-quoted text in Ecclesiastes concerning the infinite multiplication of books has nowhere found stronger confirmation than in this department. Would that popular demand had been the source of the flood of volumes that have poured forth from the press on this subject. To discriminate between them is a matter of considerable difficulty, so hard it is to determine which has the fewest faults. At the instance of that prominent philanthropist and zealous Israelite, Wilhelm Ritter von Gutmann, the executive of the Vienna community has, I learn, offered prizes for a Jewish history and a religious text-book adapted to school use. The primary intention is to satisfy a demand, daily increasing in urgency, for suitable works on these subjects. At the same time, those books that are approved by competent experts will be published simultaneously in all European languages, so as to secure uniformity of teaching.